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Rested Rafael Fruhbeck ready to ignite concert season

Music
By Jacob Siskind

"I never thought I'd be able to survive a month without conducting, but this summer I deliberately took a month off — and you see, I am here."

Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos, the new musical director of the Montreal Symphony, had just come off the plane which brought him from his native Madrid via New York. It had been a long trip and he was obviously tired, but he was also excited and pleased to be in Montreal.

"We took a month of vacation this summer, my wife, my two children and I, and we spent two weeks in southern Spain and another two weeks in Switzerland. I actually enjoyed the rest.

"We always complain when we have too much work, but I supposed I'd complain just as much if I did not have a schedule that keeps me busy all year round."

CONTENT

Fruhbeck had just completed an engagement in Stockholm with the Radio Orchestra there that had closed the summer season in that city and he was ready to begin work with his new orchestra here in Montreal.

One of the problems facing him when he took over the orchestra was the large number of defections or departures from every section of the orchestra.

"We have been able to fill many of the vacancies already and next week I begin again with more auditions. We have worked out an amicable formula with the musicians and the union here and I think that everyone was content with the way in which things worked out.

"We were able to fill several vacancies in the cello section and we had a large number of excellent musicians coming for the other auditions. Next week we have to fill some vacancies in the horn section and there is an enormous number of applicants."

One of the problems at any set of auditions is that by the time you have heard the 20th prospect you have forgotten what the first sounded like. Did he have some kind of formula?

"It all depends on how you run things. I do not believe in allowing an audition to continue on after it has become apparent that the individual does not have what it takes to fill the post. We waste his time and ours. After all there are only so many vacancies and and we are looking for the best person to fill those slots. It isn't a school audition."

Apparently vacancies in the winds and the brass section have already been filled to Fruhbeck's satisfaction. And the strings have been almost completed to this date. Which means that the Montreal Symphony will be nearly at full complement when it opens its season Tuesday evening.

RESPECT

Fruhbeck has already won the respect of the musicians of the orchestra for the way he has handled the auditions — everyone concerned. felt he made every effort to be fair.

The season ahead opens with what Fruhbeck likes to call one of his typical programs. The composers are all well known but the specific works on the program are not.

"I was amazed to discover that it was about 20 years since Montreal had last heard a performance of the Debussy Nocturnes. I should have expected that to be a regular favorite at these concerts, this being such a French city.

"Also I am programming the Daphnis and Chloe Suite No. 2, which I last conducted here in March 1973, but this is the first time that it will be presented here with the chorus required in the original version.

ABANDONED

"And of course there is the Beethoven Mass in C, which is a rarely heard work that I really feel very strongly about. This is the kind of program I like — something familiar with which the audience can identify and something a little bit different so that they will not be bored.

"And naturally, I feel that there must be brilliant guest soloists to hold the season together. They help to attract the audience and then people stay to listen to the music."

Fruhbeck was born in the town of Burgos, Spain, 41 years ago. His early musical training was in his home town but later he studied in Bilbao and Madrid. He began his musical studies as a violinist but abandoned that aspect of his musical life when he realized that he would not be able to have an international career as an instrumentalist.

His first conducting experience came while he was doing his compulsory army service in Spain. He was given the task of preparing and conducting the army band.

"It was a wonderful experience because I really learned all about the possibilities and the limitations of the brass and woodwind sections of the orchestra more thoroughly than I could here in any other way. I also enjoyed making transcriptions for the band of the standard orchestral repertoire — and that was valuable experience too.

"But my principal musical training, for conducting and composition, was in Germany and it is interesting that I came back to Spain just at the time when Ataulfo Argenta had died and left important conducting posts vacant.

"I was invited to guest conduct the Bilbao Symphony and immediately was offered the orchestra. Not long after I was invited to conduct the Spanish National Orchestra and was offered that as well. I have been conducting the Madrid Orchestra for 14 years now and I am very pleased with the progress it has made in that time.

Fruhbeck was alone when he arrived at Dorval airport this week. He had hoped to bring his family, or at least his wife, but that did not work out.

"The children are just beginning their new school year and it was impossible for my wife to leave them at this time."

Fruhbeck's career has kept him hopping about from one country to another, crossing oceans with frightening regularity.

"On my way over here in the plane I began checking over my repertoire for the past season — just since the New Year, I realized that I had conducted 71 works in the past eight months. Many of these were Spanish music, by contemporary Spanish composers, but there was also a healthy slice of the standard repertoire mixed in with some world premieres.

"Along with the Symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms and concerti by these two composers and Mozart, there are the works by Berlioz and Tschaikowsky and five performances of the Verdi Requiem.

MASTERPIECES

"Now, that is a work I should like to conduct in Montreal. I feel very close to it and am anxious to present it here. It was impossible this season but I hope to be able to do it soon.

"I am very fond of choral works and want to do as many as is possible here. That is why we are having that new series of concerts in the churches this coming season — and we have programmed three masterpieces — Handel's Messiah, Bach's St. Matthew Passion and the Beethoven Missa Solemnis.

"Of course it all depends on how the public reacts."

ENTHUSIASM

Talking to Fruhbeck it soon becomes apparent that when one tries to describe him his two most obvious characteristics are his enthusiasm and his optimism. He delights in challenges and he enjoys talking about his plans and ideas.

Despite the fact that he was obviously tired by his long flight, he chatted amiably and always to the point without allowing his attention to flag for a moment.

He checked his schedule for the next few days carefully, made a note of the meetings and conferences planned, obviously pacing himself carefully.

Any man who has conducted the large scaled works of the Romantic repertoire must learn early to pace himself and Fruhbeck carries the lessons from his musical experience into his private life.

But those choral concerts really attract him.

Enthusiasm and optimism are Fruhbeck's trademarks.

Fruhbeck in peak rehearsal form.

Guess Who's leader lives high & rocky

Burton Cummings is a big bad boy.

After 10 years as lead singer with The Guess Who, he has gotten into scraps, arguments, controversies; he's made love to a lot of women and he's drunk a lot and taken drugs (not the hard stuff); he's been around the world, even played the White House; he has sulked at the rock press and even thought about giving up the whole crazy business and going into the movies.

Through it all, his performances on such hits as American Woman, These Eyes, Undun, Laughing, Hand Me Down World, Star Baby, and others, have been remembered in the rock pantheon.

Cummings was in Montreal for a few days this week, doing interviews in a city that's never exactly been Guess Who territory.

Then he left to join the group for concerts in Texas and Ottawa before returning here and the Forum tomorrow night.

The extra effort stems in large measure to Cummings' pride in the achievements of the group, which used to be labelled "bubble gum rock" and now, with the addition of veteran guitarist Dominic Troiano, is playing better than ever, drawing raves from none other than Led Zeppelin's singer Robert Plant ("They're about my favorite group right now.")

"I can see a cross section of almost two generations at our auditoriums," proposed Cummings, from behind his shades, in a phlegmy subdued voice. "That just sorta proves that the band has been around for quite a while. I can see young people who've only heard our last three albums, and I can see older people who were already over 20 when we had that barrage of hits in the late 1960s.

"The audiences are more demanding now and it must've changed our music but I can't say how or why. We're just in the middle of it all. If we showed up at a concert and no one was there then we'd know we were out of touch. But it's impossible to tell how the music has changed because we're caught up in it."

Cummings has always been caught up in rock 'n' roll.

Of Irish descent, he grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Winnipeg, his contact with the outside world was from the records his mother bought and, later, the radio. From Fats Domino to Bobby Rydell — he loved it all.

A story from the Winnipeg rock scene portrays young Burton delivering newspapers to Dan Hunter, who is now the Guess Who's manager. "I'm going to be a star," said Burton. "Sure kid," said Hunter.

He joined The Guess Who at the age of 17, and between the time he crooned These Eyes to the time of American Woman, with its screaming protestations, Burton went through a lot of changes. So many, in fact, that guitarist Randy Bachman left the group, eventually to form Bachman-Turner Overdrive.

The feud between Cummings and Bachman has fuelled most of the gossip in the Canadian rock music industry over the years.

Bachman told the press that Cummings had gone weird on the group, that he had wallpapered his room with posters of Jim Morrison and that he started wearing strange necklaces and singing permutated songs.

Cummings retorted that Bachman was too authoritarian; true, Burton had some wild nights but he said the group had made investments to secure the years after stardom.

The Guess Who became the biggest-selling Canadian rock group, while Bachman floundered with a new group. Now, BTO has eclipsed all of the Guess Who's sales marks and Cummings decided to take measures to stop the slide.

He invited Dominic Troiano into the group, which he trimmed to its original quartet size. (Drummer Garry Peterson, who has been with the group for 14 years, and bassist Bill Wallace are the others.)

Troiano had spent a decade in such groups as Ronnie Hawkins' Hawks (replacing Robbie Robertson, who formed The Band), the Mandala (the legendary white rhythm 'n' blues group from Toronto in the mid 1960s), and the James Gang.

He produces soul singer Shawne Jackson and still does session work in Los Angeles. And now he's writing songs with Cummings, and the last two albums, Flavours and Power In The Music, have been recognized as more sophisticated than previous discs.

"Dominic understands more of the mathematics of music," says Cummings. "He's got me playing more."

The group is on the move, they've hired a public relations firm to clean up the image. Thus, the current tour is being accompanied by reams of biographical material that depicts Cummings as "a silver thread running through the often fraying fabric of the Guess Who caresse."

And more: "Cummings lunges at a lot of cute theories, bowling over facts and contradictions along the way. He can carry on that way until sunrise, his voice growing froggy, his words locking together."

When asked if, and how, he dealt with the expectations of being a rock star, he replied hesitantly: "I don't know. I can't look at myself the way other people do . . .

"My expectations change every year, every month. That's part of what keeps me going personally. Of course, I listen to the old records — anyone who cuts records and says they don't listen to them is a liar, 'cause that's the only reason you cut records."

Cummings still lives high and rocky on the road (he's purchased 150 cassette recordings on this tour), making long drunken telephone calls at 5 a.m., brooding about what's in store for the future.

"There's more emphasis on the non-musical side of things with rock 'n' roll people. They're probably the only musicians like that — apart from some real country and western types. When you try to do what people expect and go by what they say, so much gets taken away from the music. That's what'll kill a lot of these performers, they get so carried away with things that they let the music slide. Next thing you know, no one wants to hear them anymore."

A hit record will help.

The Guess Who: Burton Cummings, Garry Peterson, Dominic Troiano, Bill Wallace.

Rock & Pop

by Juan Rodriguez

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